

Three-Pronged Attack

Audemars Piguet's new Millenary bears the Maserati trident, in celebration of the Italian marque's 90th year

Simon de Burton



TAG and Mercedes did it last year; Breitling and Bentley plus Parmigiani and Bugatti will do it this year; Girard-Perregaux and Ferrari have been doing it for the past 10 years. Now, Audemars Piguet and Maserati are the latest to capitalise on the 'must-have' watch-automotive brand link-up, by forming an alliance based on what AP describes as "shared values of tradition, excellence and daring." Despite the familiarity of such claims, *QP* found that the two are, indeed, well-matched partners.



Audemars Piguet's yellow-gold Dual Time Millenary Maserati watch (limited to 450 pieces; SFr.33,000), distinguished by a case evoking the architecture of the Colosseum. For this particular edition, the sides of the case are straight, giving rise to extremely taut, clear-cut lines that contrast with the softness of the oval.

The Shah of Iran not only had money, he had good taste too. This was particularly evident in 1972, when he became the first person to take delivery of the now-legendary Audemars Piguet Royal Oak luxury sports watch. This was shortly before becoming the first proud owner of Maserati's new supercar, the Merak SS. The Shah would probably have been at the front of the queue again this year for Audemars Piguet's new Millenary watch, which bears the Maserati trident at 9 o'clock, as well as carrying the marque's name on the caseback.

The pairing of such distinguished marques seems logical. Think AP and refined, luxury horology springs to mind. Think Maserati and one concomitantly imagines Mediterranean sunshine and top-down cruising along the Côte d'Azur. So it seemed rather incongruous to arrive at Geneva airport on an icy February morning, where 15 of the latest Coupés and Spydres were lined up for a high-speed blast along the snow-flanked roads.

Mutual respect

The event was primarily organised for the British motoring press, but since it included a visit to Audemars Piguet's Le Brassus manufacture to see how the Millenary Maserati was made, *QP* was invited too. I shared a car with former BBC *Top Gear* presenter, Jason Barlow (proud owner of a TAG Heuer Monaco) and he was as amazed as the rest of his colleagues at the precision engineering, attention to detail and standard of finish that goes into AP's watches.

It is something that full-time watch fans such as myself tend to take for granted, but things were brought back into perspective by the sight of a dozen motoring journalists left literally speechless on learning that an Audemars Piguet minute repeater can cost as much as several Maserati Spydres!

While nowhere near this sort of price tag, the new Millenary still commands a fair sum. But for upwards of SFr.19,500, you buy into double the quality, not to mention heritage, of past tie-ins. Maserati fans will know this is not the first time one of motoring's most revered names has been associated with a wristwatch. During the De Tomaso era a series of reasonable-quality watches using Swiss quartz and mechanical movements was produced with names such as Trident, Merak, Neptune and Ghibli. In terms of quality and finish, however, they were a far cry from the new Audemars Piguet product.

(Top) Steel version of the Maserati Millenary (SFr.19,500), of which 900 pieces will be made. The dial is composed of four independent parts, two of which (the hour-circle and the power-reserve display) are inclined at different angles and directed towards its centre, giving an overall raised effect.

(Centre) Platinum Maserati Millenary (SFr.77,000), restricted to 90 pieces. The Maserati-blue of the hour numerals matches the blued steel of the hands.

(Bottom) Engraved caseback of AP's commemorative Maserati watch, pictured here on the steel version.



(Left) The Maserati GranSport's 4.2-litre V8 engine. Its maximum power delivery has been upped from the Coupé and Spyder's usual 390 bhp, to 400 bhp, thanks to alterations that reduce internal attrition and also improve the intake manifolds and valve seats. (Right) The 90th anniversary edition of the convertible Maserati Spyder has a special version of the Cambiocorsa gearbox, with extra software developed to improve efficiency and performance.

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Total ellipse of the heart

Developed in 2004 to commemorate Maserati's 90th year, the special edition of the elliptically shaped Millenary (said to have been inspired by the curves of Rome's Colosseum) will be produced in a series of 900 with steel cases, 450 with pink-gold cases and 90 with platinum cases - the latter additionally distinguishable for their Maserati-blue numerals.

In addition to the normal hours and minutes functions, this self-winding watch has a dual time-zone feature, an indicator for the 40-hour power reserve, a small date dial and a simple, 24-hour indicator that shows whether it is day or night back at home through a small, equally split, black-and-white dial.

The Millenary has been part of Audemars Piguet's contemporary watch range for some time, but the Maserati version, designed by AP's Garcia Octavio, breaks new ground by having straight-cut sides to the case, which is domed at the top and back; especially notable for the fact that work on the design only began in February last year (a relatively supersonic development and production time),

straight after Audemars Piguet signed its international marketing deal with Maserati to become 'official supplier' to and sponsor of the Maserati Trofeo and FIA GT race series.

The most interesting feature of the new watch is its three-dimensional dial. Comprising four separate parts, the main hour circle and the raised power-reserve display-zone are angled towards the centre. Differently sized numbers and off-centre subdial hands accentuate the lack of symmetry.

And, although the uninitiated usually stifle a yawn when they hear the words 'watch factory tour' it was interesting to see that the lightning walk-through, narrated by AP's ever-entertaining historian, Martin Wehrli, left everyone wanting more. But the snow was closing in and we had to make Gstaad by dark.

Hugging the bends

Barlow and I were in a manual Coupé; a V8-engined beast with a top speed of 175 mph. The latest model eschews turbochargers and fuel injection, its performance instead relying on carburetors



(Top) As well as the Trofeo Maserati, Audemars Piguet sponsors the Maserati MC12 model competing in the FIA GT championship.

(Above) In a spin: your author joyrides the six-speed manual Maserati Coupé GT (£56,650). An extra £2,345 gets you the automatic Cambiocorsa model, with paddle-operated automatic gearbox and four gear modes: normal, sport, auto and low grip.

Further information: Marcus, 170 New Bond Street, London W1S 4RB.
Tel: 020 7290 6500, Email: marcus@timeproducts.co.uk, www.audemarspiguet.com,
www.maserati.co.uk

and raw power. The 4.2-litre engine makes an impressive 390 bhp at a screaming 7,000 rpm.

On the road the car is unfeasibly civilised. It trickled along in an Autoroute jam caused by a bus crash, it potted around the streets of Gstaad as we were trying to find the Grand Hotel Park and, most surprisingly of all, it seemed perfectly at ease on the blanket of snow relentlessly covering the mountain roads.

Although we were lucky enough to enjoy the Maserati's performance on some curving roads and traffic-free straights before the snow closed in, the best was yet to come. The following day we travelled to a purpose-built ice track at St Stefan airfield, outside Gstaad. Here we were allowed to live-out every petrolhead's fantasy - a wildly powerful Italian sports car and a vast expanse in which to drive like a lunatic. Hand-brake turns, J-turns and '360s' were positively encouraged and, with traction controlled switched off, a mere wisp of the Maser's throttle had the back end snaking wildly and the front demanding opposite lock.

Italy's 'Trident' cars have always been exciting but, in the past, reliability and build quality was always a problem, particularly in the De Tomaso years of the 1980s. Now the firm is under Ferrari ownership, however, it seems you can have your thrills with a guarantee of reasonable reliability thrown in. They're just not quite as well made as an Audemars Piguet wristwatch, that's all. ○